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SUBJECT: LIBERIA PLANS TO INCREASE MANO RIVER UNION COOPERATION

REF: A. Monrovia 961
[1](#)B. Monrovia 1048
[1](#)C. Monrovia 1139

[1](#)1. SUMMARY: Liberia has assumed the chairmanship of the Mano River Union (MRU) and will promote economic integration in addition to the traditional focus on security. The GOL plans to encourage Cote d'Ivoire to become a full member of the union, and will propose a free trade zone along the MRU borders. However, the porous borders and extensive cross-border ethnic alliances make security an ongoing priority. END SUMMARY

MRU Expands Economic Focus

[1](#)2. Assistant Minister for International Cooperation and Economic Affairs Shonyin told PolOff Liberia would propose free trade zones along the borders to increase trade and encourage economic integration. Trade statistics for the MRU are not available, but anecdotal information indicates trade in the region has been increasing. The porous borders make it difficult to control smuggling, which is endemic. More than half of Liberia's cattle and other meat imports come from Guinea, and to a lesser extent Cote d'Ivoire, while Guineans travel to Liberia to buy textiles, alcoholic beverages and basic household goods. Sierra Leone reportedly imports rice and other basic commodities such as eggs, flour and textiles from Liberia. In another sign of increasing economic integration, we are noticing local press announcements of cross-border mining projects. Liberia's use of the U.S. dollar has attracted large numbers of Sierra Leoneans and Guineans in search of jobs. Thus far, Mano River Union members have not effectively coordinated policy on diamonds, fishing or commercial forestry, although the GOL has worked with Sierra Leone on the Kimberly Process.

Strengthening Political Cooperation

[1](#)3. Security coordination remains the primary mission of the MRU. Intelligence sharing continues, with the recent example of Ivorian intelligence reporting on an alleged coup plot in Liberia (REF B). MRU countries have started coordinating security patrols and local cooperation has been increasing at border posts. All countries in the MRU are members of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), so citizens do not require a passport to travel between countries. While there are formal border crossings on the roads, it is common for people to cross without encountering authorities. The MRU does not operate as a block within the African Union or the ECOWAS, but Assistant Minister Shoyin said one of the GOL's goals is to improve coordination in international organizations. Shoyin said Liberia views its neighbors as strategic partners, and Liberia maintained diplomatic representation with the MRU countries even during the worldwide reduction of Liberian embassies and honorary consuls earlier this year (REF A).

A Revived MRU

¶4. The Mano River Union was founded in 1973 by Presidents William R. Tolbert of Liberia and Siaka Stevens of Sierra Leone with the aim of fostering economic cooperation and integration. Guinea joined in ¶1980. The MRU derives its name from the Mano River which begins in Guinea and forms the border between Liberia and Sierra Leone. Cote d'Ivoire is an associate member of the Mano River Union. The MRU barely survived the civil wars in Liberia, Sierra Leone, Guinea and Cote d'Ivoire in the 1990s, when each country accused its neighbors of supporting rebel groups. The Mano River Union was revived on May 20, 2004, when the Presidents of Liberia, Sierra Leone and Guinea met in Conakry, Guinea with representation from Cote d'Ivoire. Leadership of the MRU rotates periodically.

¶5. COMMENT: Regional ties have improved in the wake of elections in Sierra Leone and Liberia, which bodes well for the GOL's plans to strengthen the organization and focus on greater coordination and economic integration. END COMMENT.

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